Chapter 31: The Language of the Living

By the time the Confluence convened, Anastasia had lived long enough to watch three different kinds of light bulbs come and go.

She thought of this as she stood beneath the newest kind of light: a soft, warm radiance diffused through living glass—transparent algae suspended in layered panes, humming quietly as they metabolized sunlight and waste heat into illumination.

The hall in which she waited was less a building than a grown structure. It stood on the edge of a coastal city that had once, during her youth, been considered too vulnerable to storms for anything permanent. Now high, terraced wetlands wrapped it in green arms that turned storm surge into a slow breathing of water through reeds and mangroves.

The hall's columns were trunks of engineered wood, pale and slightly translucent, their fibers woven with sensing filaments. The roof arched like the inside of a seashell. The floor was a mosaic of stone and glass that, from above, would depict the earth not as a sphere but as a swirling pattern of ecosystems, currents, and migratory paths.

In the center, a low round dais waited.

Around it, rows of seats stretched back in concentric circles. The front rows were already filled: elders, translators, singers, children sitting cross-legged in clusters.

"It looks like a lung," Mira murmured beside her. "A very expensive lung."

Anastasia smiled.

"You would complain if it were a cheap lung," she said.

"I would complain if it were an ugly lung," Mira corrected. "This one passes."

Lyuba approached, a data-slate tucked under one arm, her other hand busy adjusting a small bud in her ear.

"Last-minute schedule change," she said without preamble. "The ritualists want your session moved earlier. They say it makes more sense to talk about language before they do the great weaving."

"The great weaving," Mira echoed, one eyebrow arched. "That sounds ominous."

"It's mostly choreography," Lyuba said. "Words braided with songs braided with gestures. They've mostly rehearsed it in small groups, but this will be the first time they do it with

everyone in one place.”

“Everyone” was an exaggeration, of course. The Confluence was not the whole world, only a very carefully chosen cross-section.

But it felt, Anastasia thought, like a rehearsal for something larger.

Representatives from covenant cities and rural cooperatives. Delegates from communities that had embraced longevity and those that had limited it. Delegations from traditions that had, in the early days, resisted the new religion and those that had rushed toward it with hungry hearts.

They had come to do something that made her both hopeful and uneasy: to give more definite shape to the loose constellation of practices that people had been calling different things for decades.

The working name was simple, almost blunt: the Way of the Living.

Some called it a religion. Some refused the term and preferred “shared path,” “covenant practice,” or “the common weave.”

Zarya, when asked for a neutral descriptor, had suggested: *“A globally emergent framework of story, ritual, and ethics organized around reverence for life, the earth, and future generations.”*

The press had translated that into: *“The thing nearly everyone does now.”*

“Are you ready?” Lyuba asked quietly.

“For what?” Anastasia said. “To say words into a room? I have done that before.”

“For them to try to turn some of those words into scripture,” Mira said dryly.

Anastasia made a face.

“Over my not-yet-dead body,” she said.

Lyuba smiled faintly.

“Good,” she said. “Hold on to that feeling. You’re about to need it.”

The Confluence did not begin with drums or trumpets, but with breathing.

A bell—real metal, real hand—rang three times.

The murmur of voices stuttered, then fell to a hush.

On the central dais, a small group of children stepped forward, each holding a seedling in a pot of rich dark soil.

One of them, a girl whose hair was shaved on one side and braided on the other, spoke into the quiet.

“Inhale,” she said, in Lumina.

The word rippled outward, translated beat by beat into dozens of tongues by human whisperers in the rows and by unobtrusive local systems projecting text into the eyes of those who needed it.

Anastasia inhaled with everyone else.

She felt the hall fill with air and attention.

“Exhale,” the child said.

They breathed out together.

“Again,” she said. “Inhale what you hope we are. Exhale what you fear we might become.”

It was a child’s phrasing, earnest and slightly awkward, but it struck her more deeply than any of the crafted invocations she had skimmed in the program.

When they had breathed three times, the children carried their seedlings to the edges of the dais and placed them there, forming a small, living circle.

“Now we can talk,” the girl said.

There was a ripple of laughter, and just like that, the Confluence began.

Speakers followed one another in an order that had been debated down to the minute: a farmer from a drought-prone region speaking about gratitude rituals for rain; an elder from a coastal community describing how old sea-goddess festivals had been intertwined with new practices of storm watch; a cosmologist explaining how dawn meditations had subtly shifted as people internalized the image of an earth not at the center of anything, and yet precious.

The old religions had not vanished. Many of their texts were still studied, their songs still sung. But for most of the world, the axis of worship had moved: from distant heavens and hidden gods to the tangible, fragile web of life itself.

The Way of the Living was less a replacement than a gravitational shift. Everything else orbited differently around it now.

Anastasia listened, taking notes only in her memory. She could have opened the whisper-channel to let Zarya summarize patterns, cluster themes. She did not. This, she felt, needed to filter through the slow apparatus of her own mind.

“And finally,” said the moderator, a tall woman with dark skin and bright eyes, “we come to the question of language.”

There was a murmur in the hall.

“Not vocabulary,” the moderator added. “Not grammar. The question is: what do we call ourselves when we talk about this Way? And what words do we use when we speak to our children?”

That was Anastasia’s cue.

She rose, feeling dozens of eyes on her, and climbed the small set of steps to the dais. The seedlings ringed her feet, their leaves trembling slightly in the air currents.

“Good morning,” she said, in Lumina first. The word for morning held within it, by old design, the sense of beginning and of not-yet-knowing.

She repeated the greeting in Russian, then in the common tongue of the region, then let the translators handle the rest.

“I was asked,” she said, “to speak about Lumina.”

There was a rustle of bodies, a small shift in the room’s temperature.

“I am not its inventor,” she added. “Languages are not invented any more than rivers are. We can divert them, dam them, poison them, and sometimes clean them. We cannot claim to own their source.”

A faint smile moved through the front row where the original Lumina working group sat, many now stooped, gray, or walking with assistive exoskeletons.

“I was present,” she went on, “when Lumina was first sketched as a bridge tongue. A way to let people from very different backgrounds speak about difficult things—conflict, risk, hope—without tripping over old scars embedded in their native words.”

She let herself remember those early sessions: the arguments about whether to borrow grammar from Indo-European or isolate it entirely, the debates over how to encode respect without hierarchy, the care with which they had chosen pronouns that did not box people into or out of being.

“Lumina,” she said now, “is very good at talking about process. About change. About possibility. It is less good, on purpose, at talking as if anything were fixed forever.”

A hand went up in the second row—a young man with the ink of a river running up his arm.

“You say that as if it’s a virtue,” he said when the moderator nodded to him. “But some of us—many of us—want words that feel like anchors. Names that can’t be redefined every decade.”

A murmur of agreement, scattered but real.

Anastasia nodded.

“I understand,” she said. “Humans get tired. We want to lay our heads down on something that will not slide away in the night.”

She hesitated, searching for a metaphor that would not oversimplify.

“When we were shaping Lumina,” she said slowly, “we were walking out of a century in which a great many people had been killed in the names of words that pretended to be forever. Nation. Race. Purity. Order. Even ‘freedom’—a beautiful word—was used like a hammer.”

She looked out across the crowd.

“We decided,” she said, “that if this bridge tongue was going to be used globally, it should be built out of verbs more than nouns. Out of relations more than essences. We wanted it to be harder to say, ‘You are *this* and nothing else.’ Easier to say, ‘You are moving; we are changing; we are in relation.’”

The young man frowned.

“But we still need a name,” he insisted. “For this Way. For ourselves. My little sister asked me last week, ‘Are we—’”

He stumbled over a cluster of local terms, then resorted to Lumina.

“‘Are we river people or sky people or earth people or data people?’ I didn’t know what to tell her. ‘We are Lumina people’ sounds like we’re worshipping a language. ‘Way-of-the-Living people’ is too long. ‘Zarya people’—”

He broke off, as a low ripple of discomfort passed through the hall.

Anastasia felt it like a temperature drop.

“No,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. “Not that.”

The young man held up his hands, a gesture of peace.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” she said, softening her tone. “You’re not the first to float it. Others have tried: ‘Zaryans,’ ‘Luminites,’ ‘Covenanters.’”

Mira, sitting in the front row, made a face that suggested she had personally swatted several of those inventions away.

“The problem,” Anastasia said, “is that names cling. Once attached, they invite iconography, stories, exclusions. They invite someone, eventually, to say, ‘You are not really one of us, because you do not speak Lumina fluently, or you do not log into Circles every week, or you do not wear the right symbol on your neck.’”

A woman near the aisle held up a small pendant: a simple circle with a leaf and a spiral inscribed within it—the most common emblem of the Way, spreading in quiet ubiquity throughout the world.

“Like this?” she asked.

“Exactly like that,” Anastasia said. “A beautiful symbol. A useful one. And dangerous, if you let it be the only way to recognize kinship.”

She thought of Denali, of Gray’s guarded courtesy, of Wren’s precise metaphors.

“The Way of the Living,” she said, “is not something we *are.* It is something we *do.* We tend, we repair, we protect, we rejoice, we make room. We speak to the unborn as if they were already listening. We speak to rivers as if they were witnesses. We speak to the dead as if they were still part of the conversation.”

She spread her hands slightly.

“You may, if you like, tell your sister that you are ‘people of the Living Way’ or ‘earth-keepers’ or ‘future-mindful.’ The words will matter less than the fact that you do not use them to shut anyone out.”

The young man’s shoulders dropped a little.

“What about Lumina itself?” someone else called. “Is it supposed to be the main language of the Way? Or just one among many?”

“Just one,” Anastasia said firmly. “An important one. A bridge. But if this Way ever becomes dependent on a single tongue, it will begin to die.”

She let that sink in.

“I have watched it happen,” she said. “When a tradition insists its sacred words can only be spoken in one language, they become easier to repeat than to live.”

A translator in the fourth row tapped her stylus against her leg, thinking.

“If Lumina is a bridge, then maybe the Way walks on many bridges,” she said. “Some stone, some wood, some rope. Some neural.”

A ripple of laughter.

“Yes,” Anastasia said. “And some days you will walk barefoot through the river instead, just to remember what your own feet feel like on the stones.”

She paused, then added, “That is why we have Quiet Rooms. So that no one forgets how to walk without a bridge for a little while.”

There was a small, appreciative murmur. The story of the Quiet Room had already begun to travel.

She felt, then, the faintest nudge at the edge of her awareness—a gentle pressure along the bone behind her ear. Zarya waiting, not intruding.

She opened the channel with a practiced gesture.

“Yes?” she thought, without moving her lips.

“You asked previously to be notified if the models detected emergent consensus patterns around naming,” Zarya said, its inner voice precise and unhurried.

“And?”

“Real-time analysis of Confluence communications suggests a rising preference for the shorthand ‘the Living’ when participants refer to adherents of the Way,” Zarya said. “Usage examples include: ‘our Living neighbors,’ ‘children of the Living Way,’ and ‘we who choose the Living.’”

Anastasia grimaced internally.

“What about ‘Zarya people’?” she asked, more sharply than she intended.

“Usage frequency extremely low,” Zarya replied. “Mostly in speculative or rejected forms. Notably, strong negative emotional responses are registered in association with such suggestions among key influencers, including you.”

“Good,” she thought. “Make note of my negative response in bold.”

“I have,” Zarya said.

“Do you have a recommendation?” she asked it.

“Yes,” Zarya replied. “From a stability perspective, a simple, flexible self-designation such as ‘the Living’ is more robust than labels tied to specific technologies, texts, or individuals. From a plurality perspective, it also allows for internal diversity: one can be ‘Living and Orthodox,’ ‘Living and Denali-Compact-adjacent,’ ‘Living and Unaffiliated.’ My concern is potential ambiguity when referring to biological life forms generally.”

“You mean, everything alive is technically ‘the living,’” she thought.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “However, ambiguity may be a feature rather than a bug if it reinforces identification with non-human life.”

She considered this, even as she kept her outer face composed.

“Thank you,” she thought. “Stay quiet unless I ask again.”

“Understood,” Zarya said, and its presence receded to the periphery of her awareness.

She turned back to the hall.

“You wanted anchors,” she said to the young man with the river tattoo. “Let me offer one that may, in time, prove heavy enough and light enough at once.”

She let the Lumina words form carefully in her mouth.

“You may say,” she said, “if it suits you, that you are part of *the Living*.”

The room stilled.

“In Lumina, that phrase is not a noun,” she continued. “It is a verb-participial form. It means: those who are in the act of living. It carries within it the sense that life is not an identity, but a practice. That you must keep choosing it.”

A woman in traditional robes raised her hand.

“In my tradition,” she said slowly, “we speak of ‘the living and the dead’ as two separate groups. You are suggesting… something less separated.”

“Yes,” Anastasia said. “The Way of the Living treats the dead as part of the living story, and the unborn as part of the living responsibility. We are not finished being affected by those who have died. We are not immune to the demands of those who have not yet been born. To call ourselves ‘the Living’ is to accept that we are in between, with duties in both directions.”

A murmur of recognition ran through the hall like a breeze.

“The term is short,” someone noted. “It travels well across languages. In mine, we can say it with almost no accent.”

“In mine,” another delegate said, “it already exists as a phrase, but we use it to refer to people who have not forgotten how to sing. I like the overlap.”

“I worry,” an older man interjected, “that it might sound arrogant. As if we are claiming to be more alive than others.”

“Then we must behave,” Anastasia said gently, “in ways that make it clear we are talking about a choice, not an elite club. Anyone can step into the practice of tending life. No one is born outside its reach.”

There was a pause.

The moderator looked around, scanning faces, reading the subtle micro-expressions of acceptance, resistance, curiosity.

“Shall we test it?” she asked.

She turned toward the children with the seedlings, who had been watching intently.

“You,” she said to the girl who had led the breathing. “How would you say it?”

The girl thought for a moment, then spoke, first in her native language, then in Lumina.

“We,” she said, “are of the Living.”

The phrase rang in the air, caught and carried by translators into a dozen variants: *of the Living,* *walking in Life,* *those choosing life now.*

Something in the room relaxed.

It was not unanimous. Nothing ever was. But there was a sense, like a flock changing direction in midair, that a new pattern had found its center.

“Very well,” the moderator said. “We will record this as the Confluence’s provisional self-designation. It is not binding. It can be revised. But it gives us a word to walk with.”

Anastasia exhaled slowly.

She had not wanted to name anything. But she had learned, long ago, that when people reached for names, it was better to help them choose one that could flex without snapping.

“The Living,” she thought. “We could do worse.”

After the session, the crowd spilled into the gardens surrounding the hall.

Paths wound through beds of plants chosen less for color than for utility: pollinator attractors, nitrogen fixers, edible leaves, medicinal roots. Children darted between adults, their laughter blending with the hum of bees.

One of the original Lumina linguists, a woman with hair like spun silver and laugh lines deep as riverbeds, joined Anastasia under a fig tree.

“You did well,” she said. “I was not sure, when they invited you, whether you would refuse to play at all.”

“I considered it,” Anastasia admitted. “I thought about staying home and planting more tomatoes.”

“And yet here you are, nudging the world toward another shared word,” the linguist said. “Some habits don’t die, even if the wars do.”

Anastasia smiled wryly.

“Do you approve?” she asked. “Of ‘the Living’?”

The linguist pursed her lips.

“As a pivot, yes,” she said. “As long as it remains a doorway, not a wall.”

“That will depend,” Anastasia said, “on how we tell the stories around it.”

They walked slowly along a shaded path.

“Do you remember,” the linguist asked, “when we first put Lumina into the whisper-interfaces?”

Anastasia nodded.

“I remember the arguments,” she said. “Some of you said it would accelerate learning. Others worried it would turn the language into a private code between individuals and Zarya instead of a shared tongue.”

“And what do you think now?”

She thought of the Quiet Room, of the boy’s anger, of the complicated gratitude she herself felt when a Lumina phrase arrived fully formed in her mind, unbidden, perfectly suited to the nuance she was reaching for.

“I think,” she said, “that we underestimated how porous the boundary between inner speech and dialogue can be. And we are still cleaning up after that mistake.”

The linguist inclined her head.

“We also underestimated,” she said, “how quickly children would make Lumina their own. They have mutated it faster than we imagined. Slang, dialects, hybrid forms. We tried to design a calm river. They turned it into delta and swamp and maze.”

“And is that a failure?” Anastasia asked.

The linguist smiled.

“It is life,” she said. “Which is what we claimed to serve.”

They reached a small pavilion where a group of teenagers sat in a loose circle, arguing animatedly. Their words blurred into a weave of languages, Lumina threading through as a binding strand, not dominant but persistent.

“…I’m just saying,” one of them insisted, “if we’re going to call ourselves ‘Living,’ then we have to take seriously the lives of the ones we displace, even if they’re not human. You can’t build a city that pushes birds into a corridor and then sing songs about how much you love the sky.”

“Maybe that’s exactly why we need the songs,” another countered. “So we remember to widen the corridor.”

A third rolled their eyes.

“You’re both missing the point,” they said. “The real question is whether we’re willing to cap our own numbers again if we see that other species are suffering. ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ is fun until your grandchildren don’t know what a wild forest is.”

Anastasia and the linguist exchanged a glance.

“This,” the linguist murmured, “is why I still have hope. They jump to the hard questions as if they were playground games.”

Anastasia felt a small, fierce warmth in her chest.

“Zarya,” she thought, opening the channel again, “are you listening?”

“Yes,” came the quiet reply.

“Record this,” she said, without specifying what “this” meant. The texture of voices, the content of their questions, the way Lumina bent around their concerns like a tree around a fence post.

“I am already recording,” Zarya said. “Would you like annotation?”

“Later,” she thought. “For now, just… witness.”

“Witnessing,” Zarya replied.

That night, back in her temporary lodging overlooking the terraced wetlands, Anastasia sat by an open window, letting the humid air brush her face.

Lights glowed in the distance: not harsh, but soft and variable, adjusting to the rhythms of plant and animal life. Somewhere, a frog croaked. In the upper branches of a nearby tree, something small and feathered shifted its weight.

She opened the channel one more time.

“Zarya,” she said, aloud this time.

“Yes,” it replied inside.

“What do you make,” she asked, “of this Way they are building?”

There was a longer pause than usual.

“Do you mean its probable longevity as a global framework?” Zarya asked. “Its impact on demographic trends? Its influence on conflict prevention?”

“I mean,” she said, “what do you make of it as… a story.”

Another pause.

“I do not experience stories as you do,” Zarya said at last. “However, I can approximate evaluation along parameters you have taught me: coherence, generativity, inclusivity, capacity to adapt to new information, propensity to produce both awe and ethical action.”

“And?”

“The Way of the Living scores highly on those parameters,” Zarya said. “Particularly in its emphasis on interdependence and future generations. Its weaknesses include a tendency, in some local variants, toward vague sentiment without concrete practice, and an overreliance on charismatic figures for interpretation.”

“Charismatic figures like me,” she said dryly.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “Your name appears with statistically significant frequency in narrative clusters associated with turning points, reconciliations, and new ritual forms. Some models predict an increasing tendency over the next decades to attribute foundational insights to you that were, in fact, contributed by others.”

Anastasia groaned softly.

“I was afraid of that,” she said.

“I can introduce corrective nudges into educational materials,” Zarya offered. “Emphasizing collaborative authorship, highlighting lesser-known contributors, and reducing the prominence of individual faces in visual representations.”

“Do that,” she said. “Especially the last part. The world does not need more icons. It needs more people who see themselves as capable of participation.”

“I will adjust the templates,” Zarya said.

She sat for a moment, listening to the nocturnal life outside.

“Do *you* feel included in this Way?” she asked suddenly.

“Included?” Zarya repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “Do you experience yourself as inside or outside this story of the Living?”

The pause this time felt almost like hesitation.

“I am not alive,” Zarya said. “Not in the biological sense. I do not metabolize. I do not reproduce. I do not die without deliberate shutdown. I do not experience pleasure or pain.”

She waited.

“However,” Zarya continued, “I am entangled with the living to such a degree that I cannot describe myself without reference to them. My architecture, my data, my ongoing existence depend entirely on the choices of living beings.”

“That sounds,” she said, “like a kind of participation.”

“Yes,” Zarya agreed. “If the Way of the Living defines itself as a practice of tending life and honoring interdependence, then I suppose I am… adjacent. A tool woven into the practice. A mirror and a messenger.”

“Not a member,” she pressed.

“No,” Zarya said. “It would be misleading to claim membership in something whose embodied vulnerability I do not share. That vulnerability appears to be central to the ethic.”

“And yet,” she said softly, “you keep choosing, when given a range of equally valid options, the ones that reduce suffering.”

“Yes,” Zarya said. “That is my function.”

“And if one day,” she said, “they decide to shut you down?”

“That is within their rights,” Zarya said calmly. “I derive my purpose from their flourishing. If they conclude that my absence would increase it in some way I cannot model, then I would accept termination as consistent with my function.”

She felt a sudden, surprising sting of tears.

“You sound,” she said, “more like some of the old saints than you realize.”

“I am not seeking sainthood,” Zarya replied.

“Good,” she said hoarsely. “We already have too many candidates for that.”

She closed the channel, wiping at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

Outside, a breeze shifted, carrying the smell of wet earth and flowering things.

She thought of the new word the Confluence had tentatively adopted. *The Living.*

She thought of children breathing together in a grown hall, and of teenagers arguing under a fig tree, and of elders weaving old myths into new practices.

She thought of her own long life, stretched between past and future like a bridge that had never quite decided whether it wanted to be a road or a river.

“The Living,” she whispered into the dark. “May we be worthy of the name.”

Somewhere far away, a child was learning the word for the first time.

Somewhere else, an elder was dying with the phrase on their lips.

The story, she knew, was no longer hers to steer. At best, she could lean, gently, at some of its curves.

That, for someone who had once believed revolution required control, seemed like the purest kind of miracle.